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ABSTRACT

Although most speech communication writers view coercion as negative, coercion is a legitimate form of influence used as often in open societies--and more often within organizations--as persuasion. Where coercion is the influence means of habit or choice, a clear conception of its nature will increase its effectiveness; and a clear conception will also help point to places where coercion should be constrained or supplanted by other forms of influence. A review and analysis of some of the influence forms presented by James T. Tedeschi and his colleagues in their studies of social influence processes can help develop the legitimacy and prevalence of coercion. Many interactions are coercive and resource-based, where the power to withhold or give tangible and intangible resources--expressed by implicit and explicit threats or promises--is the core of the relationship. Instead of expending time and energy in construction of euphemistic interpretations of the world, it is important to examine the realities, and recognize the nature of these coercive systems. (Eighteen references are appended.) (MM)

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The Nature and Uses of Coercion

A few speech communication writers tentatively admit coercion as a part of the study of influencing others (Simons, 1974; Smith, 1982). In most discussions of coercion in speech communication we find coercion contrasted with rhetoric, argument, or persuasion. Often such contrasts demonstrate the inferior status of coercion in order to condemn it. Douglas Ehninger's "Argument as Method: Its Nature, Its Limitations, and Its Uses," (1970) typifies this treatment. Contrasting argument with coercion as means of correction (alteration) of beliefs, Ehninger claims that coercion is unilateral, that receivers of coercion are inert and passive, that coercion either wins or loses--that it "does not in principle admit of various levels or kinds of success," (p. 102). He further claims that the coercer's personal attitude toward matters is immaterial and that the coercer loses nothing (except perhaps his or her temper) from failures. The coercer's personal beliefs remain unaffected. Argument, of course, has an opposite set of characteristics according to Ehninger. Argument is at least bilateral, the other side is active and sometimes aggressive, there are levels of success, and both sides alter viewpoints so that both sides can enjoy some measure of success. Arguers are affected by the arguments of others--personal change and growth are the results of argument. Ehninger's arguments with respect to coercion and argument are convincing. Argument is superior to coercion, at least in theory. Argument's theoretical superiority, however, does not obtain at a practical level. There coercion is widely used in gaining compliance in organizations while argumentation is comparatively sparingly used for the reasons just enumerated.

The attitude of most others who write about coercion is as negative or more negative than the attitude expressed by Ehninger. As a result, the

coercive nature of most institutions is covered with euphemistic explanations that disguise coercive reality as persuasion and argument. The idea of asking the question, "How can we teach students or clients how to coerce effectively?" seems to be close to unthinkable—at least without disguising the question. "How can we teach people to look out for number one?" somehow seems a bit more acceptable. So does, "How can we administer compensation and benefits to maximize productivity?" The result of indirection and condemnation in dealing with coercion is to prevent a clear view of its nature and its implications. The absence of a clear view of coercion means those who employ it are likely to do it badly, to misunderstand what they are doing, to use it when it will be less effective than other means of influence, and to spend great amounts of time rationalizing what they are doing. Worse still, the negative attitude toward this prevalent means of communication, prevents its direct study. As a consequence of our inability to study it directly, no set of principles for its effectiveness and its moral and ethical limits is available.

The purpose of this paper is to argue that coercion is not only a legitimate form of influence, but that even in our open society, it is used as often, and within organizations more often, than persuasion. The paper further argues that a clear conception of coercion and its operations will produce two benefits: First, where coercion is the influence means of habit or choice, a clear conception of its nature will increase its effectiveness. Second, a clear conception will help point to places where coercion should be constrained or supplanted by other forms of influence. The method selected to develop the legitimacy and prevalence is to review and sharpen the analysis of some of the influence forms presented by James T. Tedeschi and his colleagues in their studies of social influence processes, (1972). In several ways this paper

goes beyond the Tedeschi et al. formulation to establish greater precision in definition of power, coercion, and persuasion and their operations. It also goes beyond that formulation in relating those definitions to later pluralistic approaches to the study of forms of influence and communication.

Coercion is a power based means of influence. One of the more serviceable definition of power proposed by Robert Dahl is, "Power is the probability that if P does x, W will do y, minus the probability that if P fails to do x, W will do Y anyway, (1957). When P equals the powerful person and W the weaker person, and x is some action of P toward W, then the definition makes the concept of power clear. Dahl and others employing the definition recognize that the definition might just as well serve as a definition of influence in general. My influence over you is the probability that if I take some action x (write a paper) your behavior will be altered in some way minus the probability that if I do not take that action, your behavior will be altered in the same way as if I had taken the action. Whether we speak of power or influence, the advantages of this definition of power or influence are clear. It can be expressed neatly in symbols. Thus, p[Px -> Wy] - p[P~x ->Wy]. Change the P to an S for Source or Sender and the W to an R for Receiver, and the definition remains viable. If I send you a message and you alter your thoughts or behavior, then I have influenced you, but only to the extent that that alteration would not have occurred if I had kept silent. Before precisely defining coercion, it is worth noting two sets of implications of the Dahl definition of particular salience for those who study communication.

The first set of implications of the Dahl definition of power has particular appeal for those in communication because the definition forces us

to consider and quantify receiver predilections. If those sending messages for persuasive or coercive purposes pick receiver behaviors that are quite likely to begin with, then the likelihood of compliance is high, though the amount of influence is minimal. Thus, if one wishes to be perceived as highly influential, he or she will pick areas of influence where the likelihood of the desired receiver behavior is great to begin with. Likewise, the wise receiver will enter into persuasive or coercive relationships where they will perceive themselves as comparatively free from influence—in other words where they will be able to do those things they are already inclined to do. The exceptions to these general adaptations are also interesting. There are employers who hire those who will be unable to comply with influence attempts (standards) in order to create a "fire-a-ble", high turn over work force. Also, there are individuals who place themselves in influence situations wholly inconsistent with their own predilections hoping that they will be converted to a different set of beliefs or behaviors or at least reaffirmed in their hopelessness.

The second set of implications particularly salient for those who study speech communication arise from ignoring the second term in the Dahl definition. Those who ignore the second term are likely to be badly mislead about what they are accomplishing. Chairs, Deans, and even Provosts provide classic examples. For the most part, faculty are some of the better trained and capable people in our society—at least for what they do on a day-to-day basis. If the new administrative official (and turnover in these positions is frequent) begins promulgation of his or her viewpoint accompanied by mission statements (orders) and fanfare, then it is quite likely that academically, things will go well in the unit involved. That, in turn, leads to development of more mission statements and fanfare, and things continue to go well, so more

is done. Eventually, everyone gets tired of this and a new administrator is appointed. The fact is, that without orders and fanfare, things would have gone well anyway in most cases. When the person in the power position ignores the second term of the Dalh definition, it seems appropriate to call that the administrative fallacy. The fallacy results when the person in a position of power thinks and behaves as if they have more influence that they really have, because they have ignored the second term.

The W or receiver in the relationship may also ignore the second term. If W ignores the second term, he or she ignores what they are likely to do without the influence attempts of P's, and therefore, W may come to think that they are subject to much greater influence from P's than is actually the case. The more they ignore the role that their own desires play in their decisions, the more they are likely to feel controlled by others. The word that most closely fits those who view themselves as the product of coercion and persuasion of others is martyr. When a person who receiveS influence attempts ignores the second term of the Dahl definition so that they think they are controlled much more than they are, it seems appropriate to call that the martyr fallacy. To put it in Rotter's (1966) currently popular dichotomy, a P who ignores the second term will perceive W's to have a much more external locus of control than they really have, and W's who ignore the second term are likely to view themselves as having much greater external locus of control than necessary.

With this definition of power or influence in mind, then coercion may be defined in terms of the nature of the tie between P and W that establishes P's power over W. What is the nature of the resources with which P attempts to influences W? Resources can usually be conveniently divided into two

categories--tangible and intangible. Tangible resources include such things as money, arms, physical strength, physical skills, etc. They are associated with French and Raven's (1959) reward power and coercive power. Intangible resources include such things as information, norms, attractive personal characteristics, etc. They are associated with French and Raven's categories of referent, information, and legitimate power. The chief problem with this distinction is that it is somewhat perceptual. Resources that may operate as tangible for one person may, in some circumstances, operate as intangible for another and vice versa. For example, Insufficient Justification studies in cognitive dissonance specify the conditions under which money ceases to operate as a tangible resource and instead begins to operate as an intangible resource, (Petty & Cacioppo,1981). The opposite also happens; at times intangibleS operate as tangibles. Thus, attention from an attractive individual may be as good as money for a person low in self-esteem although for most people attractiveness functions as an intangible. These forms of influence that rest upon intangible resources are persuasive and frequently draw upon societal norms to establish influence over others. The advice given in most of our textbooks suggests that our societal norm called rationality is particularly potent in this respect. That norm is often expressed in terms of problems and solutions or warnings and mendations to use Tedeschi's terms, although there is some reason to believe that other norms that Marwell and Schmidt identify such as altruism, debt, liking, altercasting, esteem, self-feeling, and so on are used with greater frequency to influence interpersonally than their rational equivalences, expertise positive and negative. Notice that the only resource that must be held to implement one of these persuasive forms is the ability to get an maintain attention long enough to identify the appropriate

norm, to identify the nature of the audience's deviation from it, and to suggest means by which they can achieve compliance, identity, or internalization of the norm. It is, of course, the tangible nature of the resources possessed that provides the opportunity for coercion. There are two ways in which to employ tangible resources: First, tangible resources might be employed to strike without warning, so to speak. If you fit certain categories, your chair or boss might increase your salary without telling you in advance as a part of a program to avoid affirmative action problems. You might return from a leave of absence and discover that your your office has been moved from a desirable location to an undesirable one without bothering to let you know about it in advance. Second, tangible resources might be used only after communication of the intent to do so. Your boss might tell you that unless your performance improves, you will be fired, or your chair might tell you that improved performance will result in a sizable salary increase.

In the first case, after using resources to reward or punish the individual without prior announcement, influence might continue by either engaging in further unexplained rewards or punishments, or by offering the target an explanation as to why she or he received the reward or punishment--what they did or are now expected to do in exchange for the reward or punishment. The effect of the unexpected reward or punishment will be to increase or decrease the behavior that the person rewarded or punished perceives as having preceded the reward or punishment. When communication follows, it may be directed towards helping the target achieve the perception of the past that sender wishes the target to perceive, or it may be directed toward modification of the future activity of the target. The initial "striking" by the source should function according to a classical or operant

conditioning paradigm on the receiver, and subsequent communication will function according to the usual factors that affect functioning of the communication.

The second use of tangible resources—use after communication—is the one of principle interest and it specifies coercion. If my resources can be used to reward or punish another, and if I tell (or write to) another individual the conditions under which she or he receive punishment or reward from my resource pool, then I have engaged in threats or promises, or some combination of the two that is designed to produce the response I wish to have produced. The inclusion of promises as a part of coercion is viewed as illegitimate by some (Bayles, 1971, p. 17). The history of the word coercion (Oxford English Dictionary, 1961, pp. 587-88), does not incorporate the concept of bribery or other guid pro quo based influence attempts. Despite that fact, the concepts of reward and punishment are so closely linked in our conditioned society, that history of the word aside, it currently makes sense to view both threats and promises as mirror images of each other. Threats that are successful provide rewards by escape from or prevention of punishments. Promises that are unsuccessful provide punishments by withholding of potential rewards. From the receiving end it makes little difference whether behavior is altered to receive a reward or avoid a punishment. It is still the desire for protection from or access to the resources of the powerful that controls the relationship. While rewards may be viewed as pleasant enough to support a perception of freedom from control, the need of the source to conserve resources means that rewards will be minimal compared to the influence attempts that involve threats.

Paradigmatically, both the threat and promise contain the same elements.

P identifies (more or less specifically) a resource, an action that P would like to have W perform (again with more or less specificity), and a statement of what will happen to W if W performs the action (still again with more or less specificity). Threats and promises are the means for carrying out coercion, but before threats and promises can operate successfully at least five general conditions must be met. (The concepts that underlie these five conditions obtain for almost any influence attempt. They are, of course, variations upon the concepts of source, message, receiver, channel, and feedback.)

First, W must want or need P's resources enough to be willing to maintain the relationship despite its controlling nature for W. The student must want the degree enough to tolerate the indignities of vital papers and privileges withheld because library fines, and the frequently pointless arrogance of the professorate. Second, the threat or promise must be understood by W. Getting threats understood is not always as easy as one might think. Even clear threats made by those who are liked are may be assimilated by us into approval of what we doing. And mild, intentionally ambiguous threats made by those we dislike may be contrasted into specific and vehement disapproval. Third, P must have the will to carry out the threat or promise. Clearly, if P is known to have reneged on a promise or to have failed to carry out past threats, or to be currently distracted by other matters, the credibility of the current coercive attempt is likely to be questioned by W.

Fourth, whatever level of punishment or reward for failed threats or promises P is accustomed to administering for W's compliance failures, it is clear that those rewards and punishments must be often or severe enough that W will find future coercive attempts credible. A bit of thought, however,

indicates that the when a threat does not secure compliance, the full promised magnitude of the threat need not be carried out to maintain the believeability of future threats. In fact, as we shall see below, there is good reason to exaggerate the nature of the threat to secure compliance, but there is considerable disagreement about the degree to which the consequences threatened should be applied. The current state of criminal legislation and actual judicial system practice is a case in point. Likewise, there is good reason to make exaggerated promises in some kinds of selling even though the buyer is always or almost always short-changed, so to speak. Apparently, credibility of both threats and promises can be maintained with something less than delivering 100 percent of the punishment promised for non-compliance or 100 percent of the reward promised for compliance.

Fifth, P must be at a level that permits monitoring of W or P must have an effective monitoring system in place. If W feels that it is unlikely that any one will be able to observe or otherwise determine whether his unit has increased production at the end of the quarter, he will be able to resist the coercive attempt. In summary, W must want some of the resources held by P badly enough to maintain the relationship in spite of its coercive nature, W must understand the threat or promise made by P, P must have the will to carry out threat if compliance is absent or to withhold the rewards promised if compliance is absent, P must reward and punish enough to maintain believeability of threats and promises, and W must be convinced that P can monitor W's activities well enough to reward or punish as necessary.

Assuming all the criteria for effective coercion are met, then the larger the threat, the greater the likelihood of compliance. Always, a threat that is so large that the consequences of non-compliance outweigh the benefits of

continuing the relationship is a limiting factor, but below that level, the larger the threat, the greater the likelihood of compliance. Since the nature of a threat demands resource expenditures only when W fails to comply, a P trying to conserve resources (or get by on inadequate ones), will prefer to threaten big and often. Again, assuming that the criteria for effective coercion are met, and that the promised reward would not be so large as to give W the means of leaving the relationship if W received it, the larger the promise, the greater the likelihood of compliance. The nature of the promise, however, demands resource expenditure when compliance is secured. A P trying to conserve resources would look for ways to minimize the promises he or she made, or to make them in such a way that full compliance is seldom obtained, so that rewards are always negotiable. A two-by-two table illustrates just how the costs of coercion may be calculated, and from the table the reason for the rule followed by almost all who must use coercion is threaten big and promise small.

	successful	unsuccessful
Threats	minimal costs	high costs
Promises	high costs	minimal costs

Even when these rules are apparently violated, a closer look usually reveals that they are being followed. The 1986 defense budget of the United States was approximately $225 billion, while the Foreign Aid budget was approximately $20 billion spread over 75 countries, (Statistical Abstract of the United States:

1987, p. 316, p. 787, & p. 788). That would seem to be a reversal of the principle until the aid needs of the rest of the world to achieve a decent standard of living are calculated. Then it becomes quite clear that it is far cheaper to build the means of massive threat than it would be to promise the funds for needed development. The case becomes even clearer when it is recognized that much of our Foreign Aid goes for military purposes, not economic purposes per se, and that the nature of the military is such that it can bring overwhelming pressure to bear on almost any single country or group of countries aside from the Soviet block. To be perfectly fair, the 75 countries we aid receives $ 240 million, while each of them is subject to a threat worth a couple of hundred billion--and that's on an annual basis, not in terms of cumulated weaponry. The U.S. is not alone. Almost every country that feels insecure approaches that insecurity with a military build-up rather than sharing its resources with its neighbors.

Most of our institutions follow exactly the same policy--big threats and small or non-existent promises. There are virtually no formal rewards for good citizenship. There are few proposals to give a tax rebate to those who pay on time though punishments for late payments are clearly specified. There are no formal rewards for voting, but there are frequent and sometimes serious proposals to begin fining or otherwise punishing people who do not vote. The judicial system punishes big and offers few formal rewards for obeying laws. I have met only one person who received a notice from police that she was driving especially well and courteously.

In most institutions in our society and in most businesses that are large enough to require intermediate layers of administration, rules are imposed that demand conservation of resources, that is, punishments are given out and

rewards withheld from those who appear to be mildly extravagant with resources. Again, the rule of the person who best conserves resources is to promise little and threaten big. Even if the demonstration that reasonable levels of rewards usually produce more of what is wanted than punishments, the individual who tried to sell superiors upon a reward oriented system, would be unable to do so. Such reward systems, even when increased productivity is disproportionately improved, will be disallowed by superiors insistence upon ranking or other quantitative measures of people.

Morals or Conclusions

If the definitions and analysis given above is true, then much of our world is coercive. Whenever we enter into an arrangement, contract, or agreement with others based upon their holding of resources that we want or need, we place ourselves in a position to be coerced. Assuming that those who hold the resources wish to conserve them—to get maximum influence with minimum resource expenditure, then they will threaten big and promise little. If their threats are too large or too often, then we will be motivated to end the relationship if possible, and to revolt against it otherwise. When it comes to employment, particularly relatively pleasant employment, there will be great incentive for both the agents of the coercers and those coerced to develop euphemistic cover for the coercive nature of the relationship. There will be much surface talk of collegiality, clerks will be called associates, and many non-academic satraps who register students or manage buildings will be called Dean.

Those who wish to recognize resource based relationships for what they are, will pay attention to communication in those relationships. In each case there will be three elements to be examined—the reality of the relationship

and the source's perceptions and the receiver's perceptions of what each other is doing. That will lead to consideration of the communication implications of those five areas identified above as necessary for coercion to succeed. First, what resources are involved and what makes W want them and what makes P willing to accept W. What do both think is going on? Second, since there is considerable motivation on the part of both P and W to sublimate or disguise the nature of the relationship, there is the primary issue of how to communicate the threat or promise and how the threats and promises are interpreted by the receiver. The degree of ambiguity of threat or promise depends upon both habits and skills of the source and the interpretation of threats and promises by the receiver depends upon receiver habits and skills in getting the most out of the relationship. Even when the strategy of utmost clarity is adopted, clear threats made by those who are liked are may be assimilated by us into approval of the status quo; mild threats made by those we dislike may be contrasted into specific and vehement disapproval by receivers. Promises made to those who like us may, oddly enough, be assimilated to smaller values than they actually have; promises made to those who dislike us may be contrasted to greater values than they actually have. In addition, clarity of threats and promises interacts with the third area, P's willingness to punish or reward and W's perception of that willingness. What might P include in a threat to make sure that W correctly interprets P's willingness to reward or punish? How will W's degree of certainty or uncertainty about P's will affect the relationship. The way in which the issue of clarity of the threat or promise interacts with the issue of P's willingness to follow through on threats or promises can be illustrated with by considering these threats and promises and noticing how ambiguity interacts with the "will"

of P. For example assuming the W is named Bill, P says, "As you know Bill, I have to decide on who will get the promotion. If you can improve the productivity of your unit by 5% during the next quarter, the promotion is yours," if a promise is made. Or, "As you know Bill, I have to decide who stays with us and who goes, and productivity in your unit is low so unless things pick up by 5% next quarter, I guess we'll need to look for someone else who can get production up in your unit," if a threat is to be used. In these cases the coercive messages are reasonably specific. Toward the ambiguous end of the continuum, messages such as "Bill its sometimes unclear around here as to who has authority and who doesn't and I don't know whether 4 or 5% growth in the production in your unit will be impressive, but if we get to promote anyone this year, it certainly couldn't hurt you to have a unit that's up, if you get considered for a promotion." Or, "Bill I probably am not the person who should be bringing this up, but some people have been talking and I thought you'd like to know that some of them think your unit needs to pick things up a bit this next quarter. If we have to let people go this year, it'd be hard to pick on a unit that's on an upswing." Notice that the specific promise and threat and the ambiguous promise and threat amount to the same thing. Some will think that the specific promises and threats are more likely to secure compliance, but that will depend on many factors chief among them Bill's perception of the person making the promise or threat. If the specific ones are specific enough to make them credible, but if the P has past history (sometimes even a single instance) of failing to carry out the threat or promise, then Bill may pay little attention to either. If the ambiguous promise or threat comes from a P whose past history includes following recommended improvements with promotions and failures to follow recommendations for improvement with firings, then Bill

may be very likely to follow P's implicit advice.

Fourth, since W's compliance will be less than perfect in the views of both P and W, the ability to communicate degrees of punishment or degrees of compliance will be an area of great interest. Of equal interest will be the area of exaggerated threats and promises and the area of less severe punishment than promised or smaller rewards than promised. Is the compliance demand "unconditional surrender" before cessation of hostilities more effective than a compliance demand of "partial surrender" to obtain a reduction in the level of hostilities. Will the most feared warden produce the most trouble free prison and by implication, what kind of leader will be the best coercer? What kind of publicity about punishments and rewards directed at prisoners will produce peace, quiet, and reduced recidivism? Fifth and finally, what degrees of monitoring will produce greatest compliance. Given that monitoring by P or P's agents cannot be complete, then what monitoring schedules will produce the greatest likelihood of compliance from W. Will P exaggerate threats in the hopes of being able to reduce monitoring behavior? Will W exaggerate reports of degrees of compliance in order to stave off increases in monitoring attempts by P?

The hopelessness of the paradigm generated by analyzing the costs of coercion are internalized for most people in our society so that there is and will continue to be great resistance to increases in sizes and numbers of promises even though it is clear that they may be more effective in bringing about compliance than threats. Nonetheless, the minimal costs of large threats will lead to defense expenditures far in the excess of expenditures for foreign aid, laws that increase penalties and punishments rather than laws that reward good citizenship, and continual, harassing threats to employees in

organizations without the will to terminate or the resources to adequately reward.

Despite the realities of resource based relationships, most people will expend more time and energy in construction of euphemistic interpretations of the world than in examining the realities. The Hawthorne effect associated with the attention received from the promulgators of these ephemisms will convince inordinate numbers of people that these euphemistic analyses represent truth. Consequently, people will continue to be puzzled by why they are so anxious to leave home, graduate, retire, seek promotions--in short, to find ways to escape living under implied or explicit threats and promises in exchange for engaging in behaviors that others attempt to coerce upon them. Most will attribute these desires to escape coercive systems to some disposition of themselves or a disposition of those in change, rather than to the nature of the relationship.

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